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# THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER.

## DECORATIVE COMPOSITION.

Translated from the French of HENRI MAYEUX, Architect to the French Government, and Professor of Decorative Art in the Municipal Schools of Paris.



### INTRODUCTION.—I. DECORATIVE ART COMPOSITION.

DECORATIVE, or as it is sometimes called, *ornamental art*, is too often considered as occupying an inferior position in the hierarchy of the Fine Arts; as having nothing in common with them, except in outward appearance. This is, however, a mistake which it is necessary to correct, since the word *decorative* is applicable to all the arts, when they are used to satisfy certain conditions of usefulness with reference to surroundings or position.

There is little difficulty in classifying arts applied to industry or industrial arts,\* such as working in bronze, wood, iron, ceramics, enamels, mosaic, tapestry, glass, etc., for decorative or architectural purposes, the latter being readily recognized as one of its finest and noblest expressions; but confusion is apt to exist when we approach painting and sculpture, no matter how decorative their chief object may be. Do not the frescoes which cover our walls, the pier-glasses, and doors, as well as the bas-reliefs, medallions, busts and statues, associated with a fine architectural building, and forming part of it, all belong to decorative art? This, their essential characteristic, is not met with in works of art conceived without reference to their surroundings, and consequently susceptible of being displaced at will.

There are works, however, which have been, by common consent, called *decorative*, although they were not executed with a view to any definite destination; but in this case they are possessed of special qualities, and, if necessary, they may be introduced in general decoration; whilst we see works conceived in view of a particular site wanting in such qualities, and thus unfitted for the part assigned to them. The main object, therefore, in *decorative composition* is the study of those qualities whereby balance between the various parts of a work, whether of *form* or *decoration*, is secured, and a whole, attractive in itself and in harmony with its surroundings, is obtained.

But before entering into these complex questions we wish to note one or two points: First, with regard to industrial products, we would observe, although they have no bearing upon art, that the practical use for which they are intended should be kept in view. Are we not right, for instance, to demand that the mouth of a vessel shall allow of water being poured easily, that the handles shall be convenient; and the various openings of a piece of furniture disposed with regard to their practical use? Exceptions will naturally be made of objects fashioned solely to please the eye, with no reference to domestic uses, such as decorative plates and ornamental metalwork. Even practical usefulness, to be complete, should be accompanied by a certain degree of beauty, so as to give to its embodiment something more than mere mechanical value. There is, unfortunately, a prevalent idea abroad that the beautiful is attained by complicated forms overloaded with elaborate ornamentation. That this is an error will be made apparent to the most inexperienced eye by the following very simple example. Fig. 1 represents two vessels of the same height, made of the same clay, and we may assume that the same care was bestowed upon the execution of each. They are each furnished with two handles, and decorated with an equal number of brown stripes painted on the outer surface; A is the work of a simple potter, without artistic education, whilst B is the work of one of those Greek workmen, whose refined taste is too well known to need comment. There is no one but will feel the superiority of vase B over its companion A; the purity of outline, the finish of the handles, the division of the stripes, at once establish a wide difference in the artistic value of the two pieces.

It will be seen from this example that a knowledge of the laws both of *form* and of *decoration* will raise the standard of any work, from the lowest grade of industry to the highest standard of art. *Clearness* is another quality which it is no less important to bear in mind, and which will be dealt with in our chapter on decorative composition. The best guide for the attainment of *clearness* is common sense. In a composition, for instance, it will not be satisfied unless all the component parts, however complicated, can be viewed at a glance, and without effort even at some distance. An undecided method, profuseness of detail, want of truth in the part assigned to the subject of the work, i.e. all the defects most opposed to distinctness (and, alas! too frequently seen in current composition), cannot be too severely or too often stigmatized, if it is wished to raise the standard of

\*The expression *industrial arts* has been criticised on the plea that art is debased when applied to industrial ends, and has been replaced by *art industries*, which is in no way more logical. We shall not enter into a mere question of words; what is important is, that, whichever expression is used, it is understood.

our art industries from the mere routine which seems to have taken permanent root in our studios.

### II.—REPRESENTATION BY MEANS OF DRAWING.

Before we approach the discussion of the laws of decorative composition we will pass in review the various ways of faithfully representing, by transcription, the forms or decorative subjects which imagination has conceived.

To work in relief, is, doubtless, the most satisfactory treatment for massive objects; but not every artist can model, and if he could, there are scores of compositions, even on a reduced scale, which it would be difficult to express by such a method. It is necessary, therefore, for the student to master every appearance of form, and to train himself to allow for *height*, *breadth*, and *thickness*; not to be satisfied with height and breadth only, which any drawing will express, but to note especially thickness, the fictitious representation of which is not easily detected. Sculptors accustomed to clay or wax modelling always bear in mind the third dimension; thus their drawings, albeit frequently unskillful, are possessed of features peculiarly valuable to artists. This important quality is not always traceable in the work of furniture, bronze, and ceramic designers, and their carelessness often causes producers, in their perplexity, to interpret incomplete drawings after their own light, or to resort to alterations and expedients which debase and but faintly recall the original composition.

Objects are represented by *projection* or *perspective*. Projection consists in determining on a plane surface the perpendiculars let down on each side of the object to be represented. This conventional view is the only one which faithfully reproduces the natural or reduced size of forms, whilst preserving their proportions and positions. The example we give is an inlaid casket with drawers and handles, seen under various aspects by means of projection, Fig. 2.

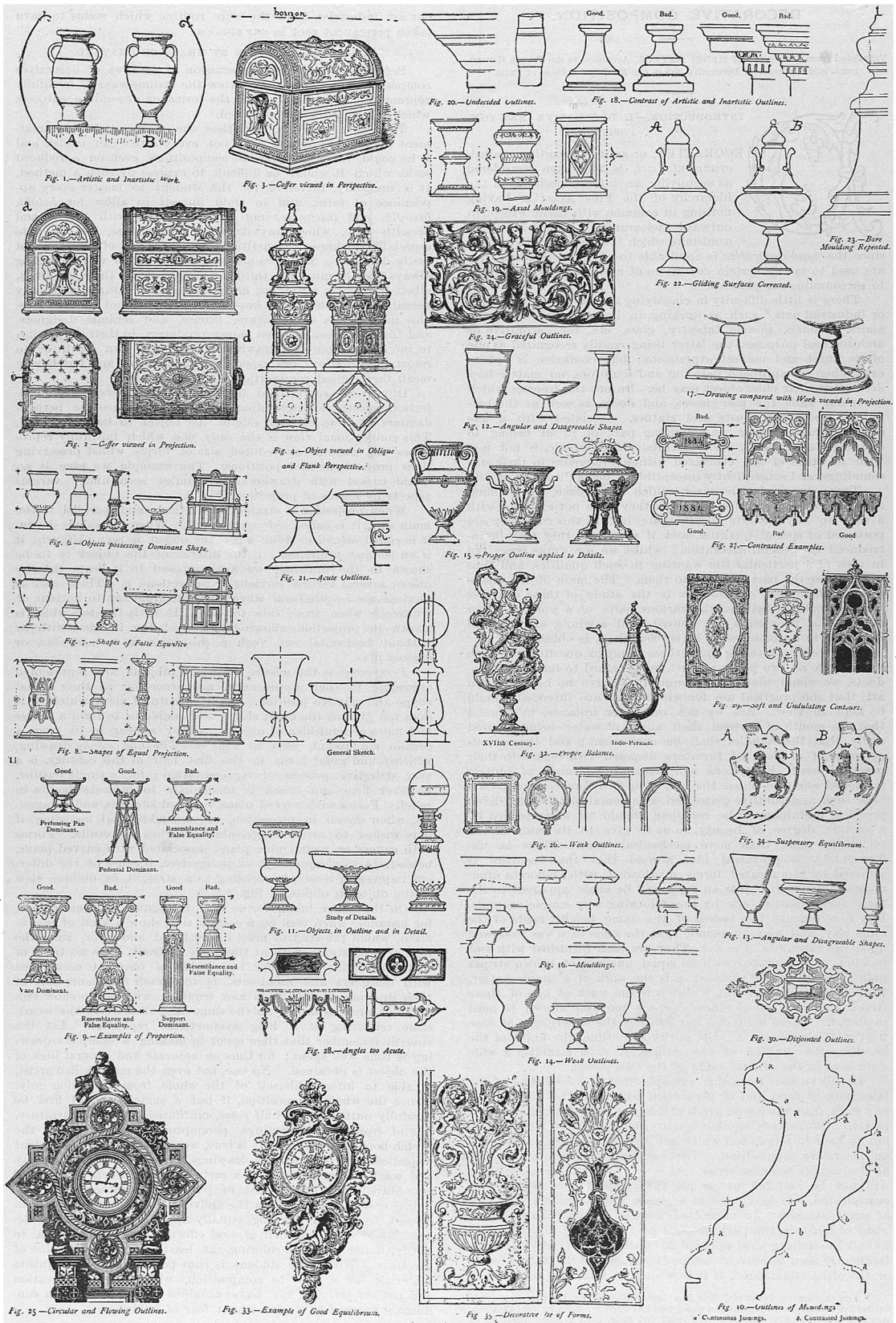
When projection is straight or vertical, and parallel to the main side, it is called *side elevation*, A. When the side is shown, it is called *lateral* or *flank* B; if the object is seen *obliquely*, it is an *oblique projection*; if the interior of the object is to be shown in the drawing, we are supposed to indicate this by one or several vertical sections or projections, C. These *cuts* or sections are *longitudinal* when they run from top to bottom, or *transverse* when from side to side. If it is the top which is shown in projection, allowing a view of the interior, with or without horizontal cut, such a projection is termed *plan* or *ground plan*.

*Perspective* is the science by which objects are represented according to their appearance, not according to their actual shape and relative position. It is a natural view, which, if it does not give us the exact shape, will enable us to form a better and more general idea of objects as they appear to us from a certain standpoint, seen in Fig. 3. The *one stroke* drawing, which found great favor in the first half of this century, is a very defective process of representation; for a single outline, however firm and broad is inadequate to indicate bodies in relief. Forms with curved plans, rounded surfaces, and octagonals, when shown in projection, require additional modeling, if it is wished to avoid disagreeable surprises in results. Forms with square or rectangular plans, associated with curved plans, necessitate an *oblique* or *flank perspective*, because of the different impression received according as a straight or oblique view of the object is obtained, Fig. 4.\*

On the other hand, forms with triangular plan, as tripods, for instance, when seen on a certain side, show a kind of *inclination*, which the student must distrust and allow for, since the regular projections, both at the angle or front, have no trace of such inclination. Another bad habit of frequent occurrence with designers and architects, is to sketch fragments only of their drawings to save time and trouble; whether to show two different surfaces united on the same axis, or to avoid the wearisome rendering of a long symmetrical repetition. Let the student remember that time spent in making a complete drawing is time well spent; for thus an accurate and general idea of the object is obtained. No one, not even the most skilled artist, is able to inform himself of the whole from a fraction only. Hence the whole composition, if but a sketch, should first be carefully outlined, and half roses, mutilated pieces of furniture, bits of frontals and ceilings, peremptorily banished from the sketch-book and album. It is true, we see in numbers of ancient collections sets of mutilated drawings, where regard for economy and want of space excuse, to a certain extent, such a mode of procedure, albeit at the cost of part of the interest and just apprehension of the objects themselves. What has been said in respect to careful drawing equally applies to compositions dependent on color for their general effect, where it is essential to notify, if not complete coloring, at least the relative *value* of the tints. When the student is thus possessed of the requisite materials for a definite composition, which close observation and patient training will have obtained for him, he can confidently proceed to work without fear of failure.

\* Cabinetmakers, architects, and workers in bronze are fully aware of the effect of execution of similar forms as compared with their designs.

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ILLUSTRATIONS TO DECORATIVE COMPOSITION, BY HENRI MAYEUX.

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## PART I.—THEORY.

### CHAPTER I.—FORM.

In the subject under consideration, form is the ensemble of appearing surfaces which define objects of art. These are composed of forms used as grounds or centers, to which painted or relief decoration is applied. Decoration and form are often conceived simultaneously, but we will take up each in turn, so as to establish more clearly the principles of composition.

It may be laid down as an axiom in decorative art, that form must be perfect in itself and should not resort to applied decoration, in order to conceal defects and incompleteness. The disregard of this principle explains the reserve so long entertained respecting industrial art, where a tasteful decoration is often applied to forms ill-constructed or insufficiently studied.

Theoretically, we will distinguish forms of *three apparent dimensions* (height, breadth, and thickness), from those of *two dimensions* (height and breadth), in which thickness is not particularly concerned. Starting with forms of three dimensions applied to objects of art, such as vases turned on the wheel with circular plans and their development,\* we shall pass through every variety of furniture down to architectural subjects, ending with forms of two dimensions, represented by decorative panels, screens, frames, borders, plates, fans, and the like.

**SECTION 1. Solids.**—Good *outline* and good *proportion* are essential conditions in objects of art. *Proportion* regulates the various elements of form, and form itself.

The first rule to be observed in order to get good proportion, is to provide that one of the elements of form be distinctly *dominant*, so that the eye, instead of being perplexed, as to the relative proportion assigned to the various elements of the work, will instinctively rest on the dominant element; thus much valuable time is saved, resulting in a simpler and more distinct impression.† It is needless to say that Fig. 6 shows a set of objects in which a particular shape is dominant. Consequently, when projections, shapes, and outlines, are dissimilar, *equalities of height* should not be given to the various parts of form, as in Fig. 7, where all the objects are defective, because apparent equality is assigned to elements which do not demand it. For the same reason *equality of projection* should not be associated with dissimilar outlines. But if the artist had intended to portray *symmetrical repetition* by means of portions of form identical in outline, then, whatever their position, rigorous equality of height or projection should be allowed to each of the repeated elements, Fig. 8. In other words, difference or parity of outlines should accompany parity of heights and projections, and the choice once made should afterwards be unhesitatingly and forcibly affirmed. These principles are equally applicable to secondary parts such as supports, pedestals, small columns, and the like, which should follow the general outline and be proportioned to the objects of art with which they are to be definitively associated, Fig. 9. *Outline* is the obligatory complement of all proportion; it endows form with its final touch of grace or characteristic impress, whilst its importance in architecture and industrial arts is too well known to require more than simple mention.

There are two different kinds of outlines: *general outline*, also called *shape*, and detailed outlines or *mouldings*. In principle, each curve of an outline joins on to the preceding, and the following curve, either by following the same direction, as the *continuous joint* (a), or breaking and crossing it in a new direction, as the *contrasted joint* (b), Fig. 10. In continuous joints each curve must preserve unity of direction and inflection, in respect to the adjacent curve, without attention to intervening straight plans, such as slips and listels; whilst in contrasted joints care should be exercised to make each crossing as *regular* as possible. Thus disconnected and broken outlines will be avoided.

General outline must be constructed exactly as the drawing of a figure, where preliminary lines are first put in before blocking out the features, Fig. 11. The outline should be firm and characteristic, without hardness, rigidity, or unduly straight lines, resulting in angular and disagreeable shapes, Figs. 12 and 13; nor should soft, weak outlines, chiefly composed of curves devoid of rectilinear joints, be cultivated, Fig. 14. These laws of profile or outline govern in an equal degree all accessories and definite parts of an object of art, such as handles, supports, terminals, and mouldings, in which search after distinct form is essential, Fig. 15.

*Mouldings*, applied on form, have an endless variety of outlines, differentiated by names which have become classical. They are divided into two classes: mouldings having *open profiles*, i.e. projected and seen in their complete development, and mouldings with *receding profiles* (Fig. 16), exhibiting parts unseen in projection, the effect of which, null in a drawing, is very

\* The vase, because of its typical shape and consequent importance in decorative art, will frequently occur as an illustration.

† Egyptian, Greek, Roman and Mediæval architecture, and in a less degree, Italian Renaissance, present numerous examples of this principle, too often neglected by French artists of the same period.

apparent in reality, and must be carefully established to prevent disappointment in the result, Fig. 17.

But what is the relation to be observed between mouldings and form? At the outset, and in accordance with the rule laid down a little earlier, the student must provide that some forms, whether of height or projection, shall prevail; consequently, *dissimilar* outlines should not be made to look similar, if it is wished to avoid a common and disagreeable aspect, Fig. 18. If, on the contrary, the artist, following an axis, had sought to repeat symmetrically one or several mouldings, each of them should be identical with the corresponding mouldings, Fig. 19. What has been said with regard to shape and outline applies equally to settings, borders, frames, and the like, in which mouldings with insufficient relief or undecided outlines must be rejected as ineffective, Fig. 20.

Sharp and acute arcs should likewise be rejected, on account of their angularity and hardness of outline, and the care they necessitate in working and preserving the pieces, Fig. 21; small transition plans, such as fillets and arabesques, will effectually prevent both this, and also the mistake of tangent juxtapositions, which are apt to create an impression of gliding surfaces, seen

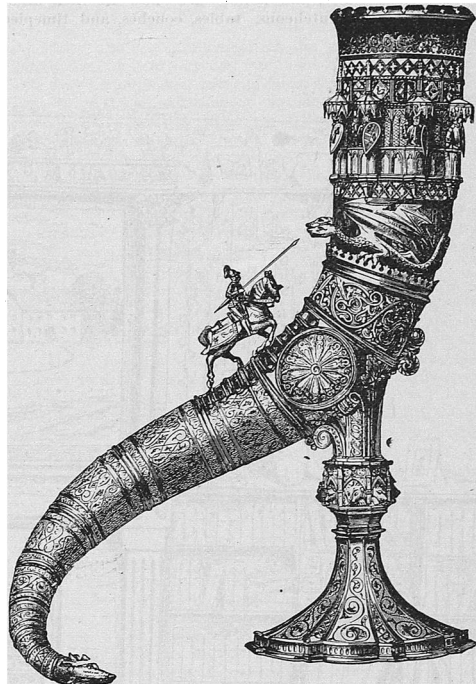


Fig. 31.—Proper Balance.

in vase A, corrected in vase B, Fig. 22. When simplicity of shape and uniform treatment are desired, a repetition of naked mouldings, occurring at stated intervals, may be resorted to with excellent effect, Fig. 23.

In conclusion, we advise the student to use the compasses as little as possible in tracing the curved portions of outlines, if he wishes to avoid showing up the joints in a very disagreeable way; the hand under the guidance of an accurate eye and feeling will achieve graceful, delicate, or characteristic outlines, never attained by mechanical aids, Fig. 24. Exception may perhaps be made for certain mouldings, such as beads, tores or gorges with circular outlines, which by their disposition require to be joined on to given centers, Fig. 25.

The best models for a thorough study of outlines and mouldings will be found in Greek and Roman architecture, in the Renaissance of all countries, in Oriental, and especially Corinthian, vases, which in grace, simplicity, and perfect shape, have never been surpassed.

**SECTION 2. Planes.**—A pleasing shape is essential in forms not dependent on thickness for their expression. The same laws which govern profile are applicable to shape, which also demands firmness and breadth in all its parts to produce character and effect. Although it may seem superfluous, we remind the student that *squares* should have all their sides of *exactly* the same dimensions, and their angles right angles; whilst the *lengths* and *breadths* of rectangles and ovals should be clearly differentiated, and *circles* should not be given more than one center. Yet these very elementary principles are too often neglected by architects

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and industrial artists, and result in disagreeable, weak outlines, Fig. 26. Partial outlines, such as ancone angles, rounded cusps, festooned borders, oriental arches, scallops, etc., are subject to the same principles. But whilst discarding solids and hollows, some parts should be kept decidedly dominant, Fig. 27.

Here the necessity is once more felt of systematic repetition in symmetrical shapes, ranged on the same axis, whatever their disposition may be, and also of the rejection of false symmetries, *i.e.* of identical shapes repeated, notwithstanding the absence of an axis. Again, unduly receding, sharp or protruding angles must not be cultivated, because to disagreeable, rigid outlines would be added difficulties of workmanship, and exaggerated delicacy, denoting not delicacy but weakness of the worst kind, Fig. 28. Undulating, soft shapes, made up of curves, are equally vicious, Fig. 29; whilst whittled edges, showing a mere confusion of disjointed outlines, should not be permitted. Examples of this may be observed in scores of timepieces of Flemish and German Renaissance, notably those of Dieterlingen, Fig. 30. In a word, in shape as in proportion, perfect truthfulness must be the ruling principle, and once a style has been chosen, be it regular or irregular, it should be persisted in and applied without the slightest hesitation.

Classic, Renaissance, and Arabic art show in their arches, frontels, brackets, escutcheons, tables, couches, and timepieces

mouths or spouts, together with mediæval pieces, in which a horn is the primary element, Figs. 31 and 32.

Some industrial artists thicken portions of their pieces to steady them; but these are subtleties not very apparent to the uninitiated, and do not compensate for bad distribution of masses, while they cannot redeem works so constructed, whatever their finish and technique, from being inferior art.

Plain triangular objects, such as tripods, three-handled vases, three-figured plinths, and the like, demand, as a rule, a relief device on the portions facing the angles or sides, which, without establishing symmetry in every respect, shall nevertheless bring about some kind of counterpoise.

Irregular pendent forms of two dimensions also require a similar equilibrium; such are those timepieces of which the spirited decoration found so much favor in the seventeenth century, Fig. 33.

The equilibrium of suspension, rather than that of station, is necessary for these forms, which may be supposed to hang by an invisible thread from a point above them, this point being in the prolongation of a vertical line drawn through the point of suspension, and dividing the surface into two parts of apparently equal weight. Hence escutcheon A, Fig. 34, will appear better ordered than B, albeit the equilibrium of both lions is the same. Essential in objects of domestic use, stability may be



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the best models for imitation, the shapes of which are marked by great truthfulness and variety.

**SECTION 5. Stability.**—No form, however beautiful, can be perfect which is not possessed of that quality which not only secures objects from falling, but gives them also an appearance of stability; hence an object that does not fulfil this condition, and completely reassures the eye, may have had conscientious mechanical skill bestowed upon it, but *artistic* in the strict and only true sense of the word it never can be called. Chairs you are afraid to sit down upon lest they should give way, tables and couches which *look unsafe* for want of strong supports, for all their delicate work, cannot be classed among objects of art.

Irregular forms mounted on narrow bases necessitate still greater care in the distribution of the masses, proportionate with the bases, to give them an air of stability. Such are many works of Caravaggio and Lepautre, those of the sixteenth century generally, and the Rocaille style; the ewers, coffee and tea pots of all styles, where handles are made to balance the

dispensed with in representations of the same objects decoratively figured in painting, bas-reliefs, earthenware, tapestry, marquetry or mosaic; thus oriental and Renaissance compositions frequently show *vases* ornamented by foliated masses, with forms and supports so fragile and attenuated, that they are only saved from incongruity by their decorative character, Fig. 35.

It will have been observed, that we have made no mention of forms and subjects obtained by mathematical or geometric combinations, such as squares, diagonals, equilateral triangles, and the like, extensively used by Egyptian, Greek, and Mediæval architects in the treatment of their plastic works. We are of opinion that the student will do well to use such methods sparingly, subordinating them to the main subject of the composition.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

A HALL should never appear to rival richness of color and elegance of decoration in the parlors, as it then seriously detracts from the effect of those rooms.